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Biblical Ethics and Assisted Suicide

Corbett Hall

New York Institute of Technology - Arkansas State University

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Biblical Ethics and Assisted Suicide

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About the Author(s)

Corbett S. Hall is a second-year osteopathic medical student at NYITCOM-AState. He graduated in 2016 from Harding University where he studied biochemistry and molecular biology.

Institution/Affiliation

New York Institute of Technology College of Osteopathic Medicine at Arkansas State University (NYITCOM-AState)

Abstract

Physician-assisted suicide contradicts the traditional role of doctor as healer and undermines the empathetical relationship between physician and patient. Suicide is a tragedy of despair and the triumph of evil; Christian physicians should consider other means to alleviate the suffering of terminal patients.

Keywords

Suicide, physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, Kevorkian

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Biblical Ethics and Assisted Suicide

Corbett Hall

NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine

State University, Arkansas

In 1990, Dr. Jack Kevorkian helped Oregon schoolteacher Janet Atkins to take her life. Kevorkian continued to use his medical expertise to assist in the suicides of more than 100 others, before his eventual conviction of second-degree murder. Of course, this did not end well for him professionally: his medical license was revoked, his “thanatron” death machine was sold, and the American Medical Association called him “a great threat to the public.”¹ Nevertheless, 27 years later, his legacy still propels physician-assisted suicide into the public square.

In 1997, Oregon passed the “Death with Dignity Act,” which by 2016 had legally enabled over 1000 terminally-ill patients to end their lives.² Four additional states have now enacted statutes, along with the District of Columbia.³ The Canadian government passed a bill legalizing physician-assisted suicide in June 2016,⁴ and policy challenges within the American medical community have heightened the debate in our own country. Now more than ever, the question of whether or not a physician should help end a patient’s life is of utmost importance.

The Christian tradition has always assumed that suicide is morally wrong, but it is difficult to build a solid exegetical case from Scripture. Certainly, both the Old and New Testaments condemn murder (Ex. 20:13; Lev. 24:17; Deut. 5:17; Matt. 5:21, Matt. 19:18). However, the idea of suicide is more challenging for biblical scholars. Theologian Lewis Smedes has noted that all six accounts of suicide in Scripture are never specifically condemned.⁵ It is therefore hard to draw direct conclusions from the Bible. Even Martin Luther equivocated on this point in his writings:

I don’t share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber. However, this ought not be taught to the common people, lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause slaughter...⁶

At the very least, the despair that drives the taking of one’s own life is a heart-wrenching tragedy and the work of our spiritual adversary. While certainly forgivable by our merciful Father, suicide is still an unfortunate result of the Fall, and should never be encouraged.

Since the days of ancient Greece, physicians have acknowledged their special responsibility to preserve life. Hippocrates pledged, “I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect.”⁷ Even the modern American Medical Association has condemned medically-assisted suicide: “Physician-assisted suicide [and] euthanasia [are] fundamentally incompatible with the

physician's role as healer.”⁸ Therefore, from a secular perspective, physician-assisted suicide would seem to violate the trust between doctor and patient. Potential pressure from insurers to terminate elderly (and unprofitable) patients only complicates the situation.

For the Christian doctor, the primary role is to represent Christ through compassionate medical care, not to carry out the work of the Enemy. Some may think prolonging suffering is less merciful than death, but that is an argument that quickly crumbles in our age of potent painkillers and palliative care.

It would seem that the millennia-old tradition of physicians preserving life is slowly being eroded. Despite the affirmations of the AMA and the sagely pledge of Hippocrates, “death with dignity” is gaining traction in our public discourse. Dr. “Death” Kevorkian and others have pushed recent assisted suicide legislation, and this is an enormous challenge to the Christian physician.

Nonetheless, suicide is not a romantic idea to be celebrated. It is the work of the Enemy, and its victims are a tragic loss to be mourned.

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools (Rom. 1:21-22).

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